

# insights

## Not in front of the children!

by Michael Grose



*The things parents say in front of their children have wide-ranging effects on their learning, confidence and behaviour.*

Ever said something about another person in front of your children, only to hear one of the kids repeat those words in public when the subject of your comments is around? Yes, children's blatant honesty can embarrass the hell out of their parents. We need to be mindful of what we say in front of our children.

But being embarrassed by our children is only half the communication story. As celebrated US psychologist Martin Seligman found in his ground-breaking research about optimism, children usually reflect the explanatory style of their primary parent by the age of eight. So, for instance, if a parent is a raging pessimist there's every chance that their kids will pick up and convey the same 'woe is me' way of viewing the world from an early age. As parents, this means we need to be really mindful of how we present the world to our kids.

### **Kids take their cues from parents as trusted adults**

But it's not just with optimism or pessimism that we need to be careful about our messaging. Kids take their cues from their parents as they work out how to behave and belong in all sorts of ways. Tell a child he has a learning difficulty and he'll believe it. Tell a child she has a behaviour problem and she will believe that. Tell them they are no good at maths and the message will more than likely stick. And why not? Children look at parents as wise, trusted adults who know a thing or two about the world. Even adolescents, who are renowned for wanting to challenge the authority and world view of their parents, still use their parents as significant reference points.

Parents who talk down other people – including teachers, friends and family members – in the vicinity of their children are teaching those kids to devalue those same people. Even when we vent about someone else out of sheer frustration we are shaping our children's views about those people.

For all these reasons, as parents we need to be so careful about the messages we give out.



## 'I don't have to do that work'

Recently I heard how a thirteen-year-old girl refused point blank to work for a teacher as her mother had said that the teacher's expectations were unreasonable. Miss 13 cited her mother's views when she refused to get to work saying, "My mum says I've got a problem with learning. She says you need to take it easy on me but you don't. I don't have to do your work!"

This type of entrenched view is very difficult for a teacher to encounter without ridiculing the parents and the young person. However stories like this are more common than most people think. They reinforce the notion that parents need to be mindful of what they say in front of their children, whether that be about the child's abilities, their teachers or anyone else.

Negative views can easily shut down kids' learning. Some children are quicker than others to latch on to even a skerrick of their parents' negativity as an excuse either not to work or to lower the expectations of others.

## Sometimes it's best to say nothing at all

As adults we have all sorts of opinions that don't necessarily need to be shared with our kids. We may hold strong political views for example, but if young people are to formulate their own opinions then it may wise to curb our opinions when they are around.

Similarly, it may be smart to keep mum if our views about religion, sexuality and ethnicity are intolerant or don't follow the mainstream. That's not to say we don't discuss these issues at home. Children and parents in healthy families are able to discuss all manner of issues, with even extreme views tolerated and challenged rather than mindlessly expressed and held as if they are the only possible truth.



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